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*Iain Chambers*

## Waiting on the End of the World?

"I am going to be quite theoretically eclectic in the sense of the things I am willing to learn from and I make my own."

"It does mean a form of knowledge which does have to be open to apparently external influences...it cannot thrive by isolating itself in academic terms from those external influences...it does not believe in the finality of a finished paradigm."

—Stuart Hall

1.

If the 1960s can be characterized as being the decade of "Pop" (Pop Art, pop music, pop culture), then the 1980s can be considered the decade of "Post-" (post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-marxism, post-feminism). A more contentious suggestion might be that the movement from Pop to Post also involves a shift from "cool" to "hot" styles, from critical distance to critical involvement, and a subsequent review of the idea of "expertise" and the figure of the "intellectual."

Pop was among the last gestures of modernism; an attempt to transform the icons and objects of everyday life into art. In the era of the Post, art is overtaken by everyday life and the everyday itself is aestheticized: our lives are artifices, our bodies artefacts, we are encouraged to live art-fully. "It's not really pop art. It's just regular...it's the way we are...Pop life" (Kenny Scharf). Of course, it is easy to exaggerate and inflate such a change, to become a clown of stylistic circumstances, but there is, nevertheless, a complex shift in gravity, a decidedly altered view and feel to the present that was neither felt nor anticipated twenty or thirty years ago. The overall constellation of thought, critical work, artistic production and everyday life has decisively shifted and taken up new bearings in the universe of our histories.

2.

While for post-modernism the media-induced sign invasion of the world spells the death of the referent, for modernism there remains the epistemological wager that a sign can be exchanged for meaning, that the image is only "reality" at one remove. The point may well be not to philosophically resolve this question, but to explore the different possibilities that it brings together; in other words, not to come down on the side of the "real" or the "simulacrum," but to force the respective concerns into a fruitful friction, to positively work the crisis that their meeting generates.

3.

I am not going to defend some hypothetical post-modernist project (surely, far too strong and homogeneous an idea to be "post-modernist"?), but prefer to

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look at the perspectives, proposals and possibilities that the debate around modernity and post-modernity has *uncovered*. I like to think that the "noise" that has been generated, the spaces that have been opened up between the signs, betrays an unsuspected "truth" about the contemporary critical condition. A truth that may help us to better experience and engage with what Stuart calls a "more adequate account"...

4.

An "adequate account": any idea of "adequacy" involves the testing of previous limits. Working over previous ground does, almost inevitably, involve moving beyond (which is not the same as cancelling them out) previous referent points. Post-modernism is clearly an attempt to "move beyond" previous referent points, although not necessarily in an obviously linear or purely nihilistic fashion. I think that this "moving beyond" has a double edge; one largely negative, the other more optimistic and affirmative.

5.

It is perhaps unjust and imprecise to suggest that post-modernism merely entertains the idea of "the end of the world." More suggestively, and more accurately, it does suggest the end of *a* world: a world of Enlightened rationalism and its metaphysical and positivist variants; in a more immediate language, a world that is white, male and Euro-centric, and which believes that its rationalizations are the highest form of reason.

That "world" is increasingly cracking apart as both internal and external forms of history, knowledge and power multiply. Old meanings do indeed find themselves meaning-less; there is a new complexity which can be received either as an extension of sense or as its uncontrollable dissipation.

Now, on one edge of the heterogeneous post-modernist discourse I think there is the welcomed registration of this expanded condition; on another, there is an altogether darker vision, particularly with Baudrillard.

It is possible to discern in the sheen of Baudrillard's breathless prose the long shadows of the Frankfurt School. Pushed to its logical extreme, the commodification of the world (that is, the "hyper-reality" of a totally alienated social existence) comes to its final steady-state in the perfect "simulacrum": "use-values" are obliterated in a perpetual exchange of signs that bear "no relation to any reality whatever." We are therefore now involved in the next logical step after alienation: the obscene transparency of the post-spectacle, "...so long as there is alienation, there is spectacle, action, scene... Obscenity begins precisely where there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparent and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 130).

In a world that is running down, that everyday produces less sense, Baudrillard's cold philosophy represents a bleak dirge for the loss of meaning, for the withering away of the external guarantees, the referents, that have been nullified in the empty space between the signs. Baudrillard is a space age "flaneur" in a dying universe, casting the isolated light of his melancholy reason on a world that is travelling on an uncontrolled path towards the black hole of meaningless. This does not represent a passive acceptance of the present so much as the logical extremes of a pessimistic rationalism (an excess that spills over the limits of the previously "rational"): the acknowledgment that a certain intellectual role, and the knowledge once associated with its critical "distance" (and subsequent authority and "truth"), is being ineluctably swept away in the enveloping and indifferent movement of the modern world. This is what Baudrillard likes to call the "historical collapse" in which everything becomes ecstatic and ex-centric, without a referent or center.

6.

The rhetorical flourish of "the collapse of the real" is ultimately an ambiguous assertion. What is undoubtedly collapsing is a previous confidence in assigning an unequivocal sense to the "real"; the "real" as a rationalist paradigm for producing a complete or exhaustive knowledge does indeed collapse. Knowledge, and the realities it speaks for, becomes altogether more complex. The one-dimensional rationalist plane is supplemented by a more complex epistemological figure and the need, for example, for more articulate prospects, practices and politics. As Edward Said (1978) has pointed out, any rationalist codification (the "knowledge" that constitutes the field of "Orientalism," for instance) is simultaneously the codification of the historical powers invested in the paradigm and their underlying relation to the "real" (racism, Eurocentrism and imperialism, for example).

So the rhetoric of declaring "the collapse of the real" could be fruitfully worked to crack the code of a paradigm that ultimately blocks our passage to the recognition of other realities; just as marxism has had to be cracked in order to recognize the importance of gender and sexuality. The "collapse of the real" can lead to the possibility of breaking previous bounds and grasping other realities...

7.

The idea of a neat (epistemological) break between modernism and post-modernism is, of course, a further rhetorical device. Naturally many tendencies that today are embraced as being central to post-modernism—from the ideas of pastiche and collage to the spectacularist strategies of Situationism—were also central to modernism. And anyway to argue like that, with a commitment to a linear perception of change and "progress," would again be contrary to a post-modernist view. It might be better to think in terms of a shift in the constellation. The same referents, the same tendencies, acquire a different outline and sense when viewed from another perspective. The stars do not disappear, but the constellation changes shape; the power of illumination cast by individual planets sometimes wanes, sometimes increases. They remain, the universe is *there*, but the knowledge we have of it is neither obvious nor simply accumulative.

To search for a precise "break" is futile. Nevertheless a preliminary "moment" that sets the conditions for this possibility can perhaps be discerned in the first three decades of the present century. These are the decades where in Europe language and representation break down and the avant-gardes emerge to tour their ruins—in the visual arts, in writing, in music, in theatre, in politics. Isn't the discourse on and of psychoanalysis the most significant codification of this recognition of the fact that the apparent and rationally received, is always accompanied by an "other": the unconscious...the etymological marriage of criticism with crisis...the possibility of break-down and termination. And to this "other" we can add a supplementary and more extensive development: the spreading power of the previously unrecognized pleasures and languages of urban popular culture as this century advances.

8.

Until extremely recently, popular culture has lacked a "serious" discourse. In other words, it was almost totally disassociated from intellectual culture, and so was completely under-represented in THEORY, except by negation (i.e., it was not "culture"). But the languages of dance, of streamlining, of cars, of jazz, of rock'n'roll, of fashion, of radio, cinema and television, produced subjects who managed to achieve recognition without first appropriating "serious" culture. This creates a divided sense of culture (as a minimum, "ours" and "theirs"), and a crisis

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in its previous languages: there were whole cityscapes, soundscapes and pleasuresapes existing quite oblivious of the canons of ART and "good taste." This consequently undermined early assumptions about "taste," "sense" and "meaning." The "knowledge" and "expertise" exercised in "mass culture" was not the property of a restricted priesthood of intellectuals but formed (and forms) an essential part of the profane practices of everyday life. There is a fundamental political resonance in this situation, a potential democratisation of any "culture and society" debate.

It is possible that the "masses" Stuart refers to, at least in western, capitalist countries, have become historical subjects, not so much through the representative organs of parliamentary democracy (a fairly limited institution, especially in Britain), but through urban popular culture. It is there that the greatest exercise in the powers of local choice and taste have been realized, effectively overturning and remaking the field of culture in a far more extensive fashion than the presence of the "masses" in the more restricted field of politics has so far achieved. This, in turn, raises significant questions about power and politics in the everyday world, about the construction of an effective, alternative hegemony and historical bloc. Perhaps the particular histories of culture and politics in Britain (as well as elsewhere) suggest that it is not a more political culture that is needed but a politics, built on culture, that cracks apart the present codification of the "political": after all, it is "civil society" that makes "political society" possible (Gramsci).

Those areas most traditionally excluded from the "political"—the familial, the sexual, the private—provide the languages in which daily sense is usually secured and where eventually more extensive social meanings (politics) take shape. It has been in these areas, in the "microphysics of power" (Foucault), that politics has recently experienced its greatest innovations: feminism, gay liberation, the ecological movement, local government. Meanwhile, the "real world" of politics does indeed seem a mere simulacrum: untouched and uncontrolled by popular sentiments, an empty sign play that constitutes "government." The effects are felt, are real enough (in Britain the dismantling of the Welfare State, war in the South Atlantic, the abolition of Greater London Council), but the language and machinery remains distant and opaque. This is the other side of democracy, your abstract involvement (representation) is disinvested of real involvement (power). Most of us do experience politics as a simulacrum of power, not as an intervention on the "real."

#### 9.

Now the crisis in the languages of representation, in culture, in politics, together with the spread of the alternative semantics of popular choices and tastes, fundamentally involves, as Lyotard points out, a crisis in the legitimation of knowledge and power. The productive tensions in this crisis don't really acquire affective contact and shape until the 1950s and 1960s. And are only finally caught up with (?) by intellectuals in the 1970s when the term post-modernism starts to make the rounds in architecture and literature in Anglo-American contexts, and in Continental Europe in the wake of the "crisis of marxism" in the late 70s.

This shift, which is certainly not unified, can nevertheless be traced in critical, aesthetical, historical, social and political terms. It is most marked by a consensual movement away from the theoretical production of the "world" to dealing with its experiential production (which, of course, is not without its own theorizing moment). It becomes post-ideological, not because ideologies have somehow evaporated, but because it recognizes the need to move beyond the ideological critique; to move beyond standing on the social margins exposing ideologies, and because it seeks to connect to a more involved and affirmative

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moment: the point at which practices and projects begin to intersect. Where, for example, in the female iconography of the 1980s "...feminist ideas are taken up pragmatically, translated into the practical and individual skills of the street-wise" (Winship, 1985, p. 40). The pressures of actuality push aside over-abstract attempts at refashioning the real.

This is the famous argument for the importance of surfaces, and the almost baroque importance given to the superficial, to appearances and details. As the Italian philosophers Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (1983) recently put it: "The metaphysical adventure is over." To repeat, this is a theoretical (and political) choice. For it does not emerge from nowhere, but from a history of theories and appropriations of the "real." It is perhaps here, at this level, inside often quite different histories (architectural, literary, critical, philosophical and political), that we find this suggestion of a new configuration.

10.

So, there is not a break as such, more a widening sense of an attempt to break through, to crack existing codes that are straining under the load of the present; an attempt to formulate a perspective, a project, more adequate to this present and a possible future.

At this point, post-modernism, like any "-ism," is not of course the ANSWER, nor does it usually pose itself in such terms. But its irruptive presence, which is certainly both theoretical, irreverent and sometimes simply modish, does permit a space to talk about the adequacy of contemporary projects. Its nihilist strain provides the opportunity to break with the silent authority of certain inheritances and to more self-consciously address the contemporary critical condition. Which is not to say that the past is merely abandoned, rather it comes to be reworked from another vantage point; its traces are not simply accumulative, they are also polydimensional and re-scriptable. Put in other terms, the world we inherit and inhabit can still be transformed...

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